An Interview With Camille Paglia

LUCA BABINI

I feel very Italian Catholic. But I don't feel Christian, I have to say that.

CAMILLE PAGLIA has been called "America's premier intellectual renegade," "the most charismatic scholar to appear in years" and "Hurricane Camille." After she worked in relative obscurity for 20 years, her scholarly work, Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson, *an original reading of art and literature, became a best seller in 1990. Since then she as rarely been out of the public eye, appearing in publications ranging from The Times Literary Supplement to The New Republic to Playboy. A professor of humanities at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Professor Paglia has written extensively on popular culture, feminism, religion, sex, politics and the "venality and sycophancy" of academic culture. She has been heavily influenced by her Catholic background, which she delights in even while professing herself a lapsed Catholic. Her most recent book,* Vamps & Tramps: New Essays, *has just been published by Vintage Books. James Martin, S.J., associate editor of* AMERICA, *spoke with Professor Paglia about her Italian Catholic background, the American church, saints, gay activism, pornography, women, celibacy, crèches and the Virgin Mary. The interview was conducted on Oct. 24, 1994.*

What is it about Italian Catholicism that appeals to you?

Well, I feel that Italian Catholicism is like a *culture* even more than it is a religion. It's similar to Judaism in that sense. I have many friends who are non-practicing Jews, but they're culturally Jewish and if they have children they transmit that culture through the rituals of the religion to their children. It's almost part of their national continuity, even more than their beliefs. And that's what I began to understand about Italian Catholicism—that it really unifies and is the point of continuity with antiquity.

Anyway, I began to realize that the things I loved in the Italian Catholic culture as a tiny child were the *pre-Christian* things in the church—like statues of the saints—St. Sebastian up near at the altar. I *stared* at that statue. It was this pretty-boy, totally polychromed, absolutely hyper-real statue, with all the rosy skin tones, and him posing very prettily with his hands behind his back and his little loincloth flipping off his hips, looking up, with arrows and blood coming out, and the expression on his face of half pleasure, half pain, and I just stared at it.

I have to say that the images of Mary, Joseph and Jesus just did *not* make any impression on my child's imagination in the way that St. Sebastian did and the other statues in that church. To the right was St. Lucy, holding out her eyeballs on a plate. Next to her was St. Michael the

Archangel in his Roman armor with his sword in the air and his silver shield trampling the serpent-devil beneath him. He is my favorite saint and remains that; I have a medal of St. Michael the Archangel. And this to me is a vision of a Roman soldier, a vision of Mars, of a great pre-Christian soldier. To the left up on a pedestal were Sts. Cosmas and Damian—to this *day* I have no idea who the heck they are! But they were so vivid—what fashion statements! They were wearing these green robes and they were holding every kind of weird emblem, golden fronds and it was very mysterious—these twins to one side with these odd emblems. And the windows of that Church of St. Anthony of Padua in Endicott, N.Y., very rich stained glass windows with episodes in the life of Christ. The theater of it. The *drama* of it!

So I began to realize as time went on that the things I loved most in the church were these highly sensory, highly sado-masochistic and homoerotic, agonistic and militant things. The whole cult of the saints made *far* more impression on me than Jesus.

As I learned more about religious history, I began to understand that these were really later elements added to the church—exactly the things Martin Luther was protesting against and purged *from* the church, to return Christianity to its primitive basis. And I have accepted that, and I believe that Protestantism *is* in fact closer to primitive Christianity.

So I feel *very* Italian Catholic, I feel very Catholic. But I don't feel Christian. I have to say that.

What does it mean to say you don't feel Christian?

I don't identify with Christianity. It seems to me that Christianity has not dealt with two main issues—sex and violence. Hence, the first chapter of *Sexual Personae* ["Sex and Violence or Nature and Art"]. Sex and violence seem to me the essence of nature—aggression and power and sensuality and the instinct to breed and to mate. All of these dark Dionysian passions. Because Dionysus is not just sex. (That, to me, is the error of the 60's: to think that Dionysus symbolizes only pleasure.) Whereas anyone who reads Euripides' "Bacchae" sees that Dionysus was a continuum of life in the body, which is pleasure-pain. Once you start pursuing pleasure, you're going to get pain.

So Christianity for me is not as accurate as Greco-Roman paganism in dealing with issues of sex and violence.

I have *never* been Christian; it just doesn't take with me. Judaism is a little more violent; that is, God is angrier in the Old Testament. He's a god of vengeance—which is very Italian, the vendetta and so on. And you have the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That's more my style than to turn the other cheek. This turn-the-other-cheek thing, I just do not identify with that. I don't believe in that *at all*. I mean, not only am I Italian, I'm an Aries—born under the sign of the War God. So we Aries women, like Joan Crawford and Bette Davis, tend to be very militant, very combative. So there's always been a struggle, I've always felt like an alien.

Another issue concerns Mary, whom you mentioned [in a letter requesting the interview] being offered as the ideal role model for women. This was always the case, but especially in the post-war period in America, I allege, the image of Mary got extremely homogenized. When you look at the image of Mary as she was honored by, say, my grandmother's generation or relatives in Italy or people in Spain or Mexico, I think that kind of Mary is a little more *awesome*, more majestic, mysterious. She has a tendency to appear in grottoes and give sibylline messages.

This Mary of the post-war era in America got real bland. Really, *really* bland. This is not the kind of Mary who's going to appear out of nowhere and frighten you in the middle of the night in a grotto! This Mary was just a completely obedient wife and mother, without *any* personality. I cannot tell you how boring the statues of Mary in the American churches in the 50's seemed to me. In the old images, you actually used to see her foot coming out of the robe; she used to be trampling the serpent—at least you'd see *that*. At least you'd see something in the image that was a little negative. *Something*. But these Marys compared to the other statues of the saints, she just seemed like such a *zero* to me. An absolute zero.

So the image of Mary as promulgated in American Catholic Church in the 50's certainly helped to give me a

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sense of gender dysfunction. I just did not identify with that at all. And *this* was the image of womanhood that was being asked of us—desexualized. This image of Mary had no aggression whatever.

A parallel image for me would also be the crèche. The crèche drove me crazy! Ever since I was little, at Christmastime there would be the crèche. We'd have all these little images, and they were great—little statuettes. (In those days they weren't plastic, they were beautiful little things, gorgeous.) My sense of alienation from Christian iconography occurred at that time also because I just couldn't stand this scene with the baby and Mary and Joseph in this *hovel*, there in this stable. What I did love in the crèche were the Magi. I loved the Magi. *Loved* them.

Why?

As years went on I realized why. What a fashion statement! They are gorgeous! First of all, they were multi-racial—one was always black. They were kings; they were hierarchs. They had these beautiful garments of silks, satins. They were just beautiful to me. The imagery—I loved them. They were the only thing I loved about the crèche! Otherwise, it was just so depressing.

The whole altar, of course, they dropped a bomb on the altar, which is what they've been doing for the last 25 years.

And, oh, it's all coming back to me now! You're forcing me to have all these memories! When we were in grade school, we kids were forced to sing "Silent Night"! There was always this thing at Christmastime, another *fascist* thing, where the children were trotted out and trained for the entertainment of the teachers and the parents. How *wonderful*—the children sing "Silent Night." This is what was so alienating about Christianity, of course. I was looking forward to rock-and-roll—our generation's voice would be rock. We would want this big, savage, loud sound, and here we were being asked to have a very *tranquillized* sound, *silent* night, *holy* night, *tenderness* of the mother and child and all that. It was all absolutely unbearable, the whole thing with the crèche, the baby, the tenderness, that we were being asked to honor and venerate. The whole idea that *that* was our fate as women, all that we could aspire to be.

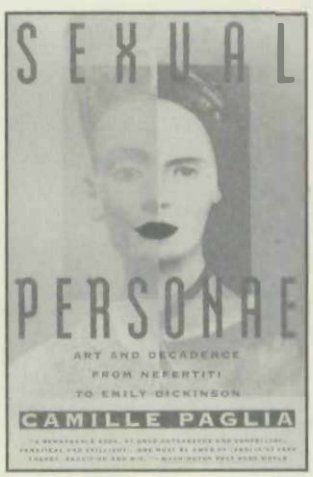
Passive?

Yes, passive! We were the handmaidens of the baby that comes out. And then the stable, I hated that. *What* are we being asked to identify with? Now, *I* loved things about ancient Rome, ancient Greece and Egypt. I loved everything about Ancient Egypt. *Loved* it. I can't explain why, maybe because I was taken to the Metropolitan Museum as a child. The big sphinxes, the largeness, the monumentality of the artifacts, the beautiful mummy cases, the jewelry. Everything seemed very beautiful. And so I would compare that iconography to this business with the stable, the straw and the whole thing with humility. I just never identified with it.

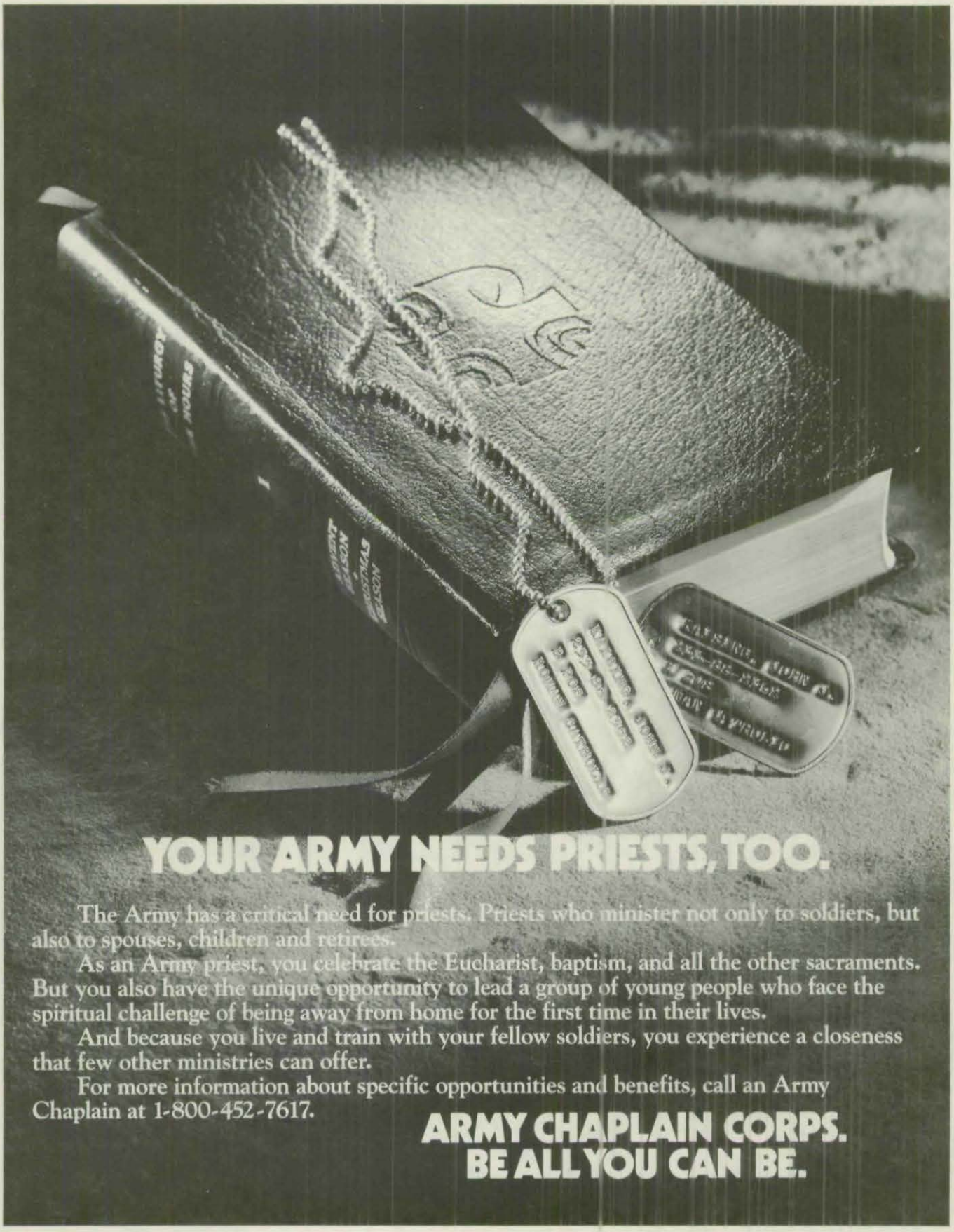
One of the biggest revelations to me as the years went on, was when I realized that the Magi were *pagan* emissaries. I suddenly realized that my entire life I had an *unerring* instinct for the pagan—whatever it was—the non-Christian. The very things I disliked in my religion were authentically Christian and everything I loved was pagan! And so this is what is crucial.

I was totally alienated from American Catholicism at the time. And then I became more indignant later on, in the late 60's and 70's, as I began seeing a pattern in American Catholic churches: As they were being refurbished and restored, there was what I now regard as a snobbish purgation of the ethnic origins of the parishioners in these churches.

This happened to me repeatedly. When I was in New Haven in the early 80's—after getting fired from Bennington College—I was back finishing *Sexual Personae*, and there was this church, the mother church of the Knights of Columbus, right on the little street where the Yale President's house is. And I loved that church. I would go in—I wasn't going to church any more but I love churches, I love architecture and artwork. It had an incredible, huge, very gory crucifix—a life-sized statue scene as you went in the door. There was Jesus on the cross, tortured, Mary Magdalene and Mary, in the form of great lamentation. *Not* the passive Mary! And everyone with tears flowing down their cheeks. The young John. The whole church was *filled* with statues. I loved it.



Well, they decided to refurbish. Of course,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what do they do? Oh well, those statues are passé, those statues are vulgar! We don't want those statues! Something that's *never* done in Europe. Never done in Europe. If anything in Europe is restored, what is there is *kept*. That's why people *go* to Europe on vacations to see the past, to see history. But not in America! In America we have to *modernize*! They remodeled that church from the inside. The statues were taken down to the cellar and out of sight. I *couldn't believe* it.

The whole altar, of course, they dropped a *bomb* on the altar, which is what they've been doing for the last 25 years. Heaven forbid that the actual design of the altar, which is leading upward toward God, heaven forbid that should be left. They blasted it all out, removed the rail. It's all open, it's like a Chamber of Commerce/guild hall in the front, so you can have a *meeting*!

It's totally sanitized. And, of course, what does that do artistically and architecturally to the church? It is incoherent. That church was a total architectural environment once. The outside of the church, as it was done originally, matched the interior—and they were based on European models. Now we have this *abomination* in America of these shells of the old churches with these *barbecue-pit* interiors! These airline-terminal interiors. What does this do to young Catholics? I think it just removes any visual culture.

Recently, I was taking a walk in San Jose, Calif., and saw a church. Apparently there's a settlement of Portuguese near San Jose. I was walking along the main street and saw this gigantic church, a beautiful baroque style church, and I went into it. It was a Portuguese church. And I was in seventh heaven. I could have cried. The *statues* in that church! All of the history of the Catholic Church is in that church. Not just the famous saints, but saints that were so ambiguous, so unknown that every one had their names under them! All of the great monks and the brothers and the nuns, incredible numbers of them. Ones who had founded orders, some of the great martyrs of the early church. They were all there. So many! Everywhere! And I was absolutely in ecstacy. I read as many names as I could. Some of them were so high up that you couldn't even read who they were.

And I saw my favorite saint, the great Teresa of Avila, up towards the front near the altar. And I was so thrilled to see her. Have you seen my new book with the saint in it?

Yes, with the chapter on St. Gabriel the Passionist.

Right! Now this is unheard of: Never in history, except in the time of the French Decadence would you get this kind of combination where you have this saint's picture in it (with a devotion to him) and then an article on the penis and drag queens and all of these bizarre things. What I'm doing, of course, is dramatizing the continuity of Italian Catholicism, which has this weird combination of religiosity with pagan sensuality.

I've told this story, that's so descriptive of Italian culture, before: that scene at the end of "La Dolce Vita," Fellini's great epic of decadence of 1959. That great scene where, after this long, extremely lurid party with these Italian aristocrats, at dawn the mother appears at the end with the family priest and summons her sons and her grandchildren to go to Mass. And they obediently trot off to Mass with her. All the other aristocrats are staring at this with their mouths hanging open! To go directly from the orgy to the chapel, you see, is something that seems to be possible in Italian culture. And I don't know why or how, but it's this weird combination. And I think it's because in some way Italian culture is still *pagan*.

The folly of gay activism is that it has set itself against religion.

And therefore everything people don't like about the pope and the Vatican, the whole elaborate paraphernalia of it, I love that part! That's the romantism in Roman Catholicism, that's what I *love*. It's exactly what people hate.

That's why I have this argument going on with gay activists. They are attacking the very things that, I think, in fact are part of the strengths of Catholicism. I think it's suicidal for gay activists to be in that kind of relationship to religion. It's not at all what Gandhi did; Gandhi drew upon the spiritual traditions of his people. He was Westernized, but turned back to the iconography of the Hindu monk. Martin Luther King Jr. was a minister, who drew on the traditions of his people—the call for civil liberties—and he spoke to the soul of mankind. But the folly of gay activism is that it has set itself against religion.

You're talking about groups like ACT UP?

ACT UP is nihilistic. *Completely* nihilistic. It wants to destroy the authority of religion, but it has nothing to put in its place. That is the tremendous failure of the gay establishment to me.

Now, my credentials are out there. I was an open lesbian before Stonewall! When I arrived at the Yale Graduate School in '68, I was the only openly gay per-

son—and I didn't have a sex life! I was out there pushing the line, and I got all the pain and none of the pleasure. My credentials are out there—someone who challenged things when there was no support group. So I'm not going to take any guff from these Johnny-come-latelies.

For me, I don't believe in God, yet I believe in all gods. I believe that the great religions of the world are these repositories of spiritual experience. And each one of the great world religions contains insights about the nature of the universe. It's a metaphysic, a body of ethics. And people need guidance, people need meaning. The folly of 20th-century leftism has been this wanton destruction of values and of this incredible body of material—not to mention all the art contained in these great world religions. Without anything to put in its place. And so now we're reaping the whirlwind. It's now the 1990's and we have a whole generation of young people who have nothing. *Nothing*. They've been given nothing.

We have in the Greco-Roman tradition, a strong homoerotic presence among males (by the time we get to classical Athens) and females, as in the case of Sappho, etc. So that's what I'm trying to do: to argue that *neither* pagan *nor* Judeo-Christian should dominate the common ground.

So, for example, in pornography, I'm radically pro-pornography, according to the pagan way. However, I believe in strict separation of public and private spheres. The government may not intervene in anything in the private realm. Therefore, I support legalization of drugs, abolition of sodomy laws, all of those things. But the public realm: Let's take the example of pornographic magazines. I maintain that pornographic magazines must be available universally. No one has the right to prohibit their distribution. However, we may reasonably ask that *display* of these magazines may be restricted. A Christian person coming out of the subway should not have to be assailed at the newsstand by a row of naked ladies on the fronts of magazines. However, those magazines should be available at the newsstand.

But it is a *pagan* intrusion in the shared space, that's my argument. Therefore, I don't see any problem in asking the pornographic magazine to be put in a slip-cover—that is not censorship to me. But it does seem to be censorship, when you get this alliance between Protestant groups and feminists driving Penthouse and Playboy out of the convenience stores.

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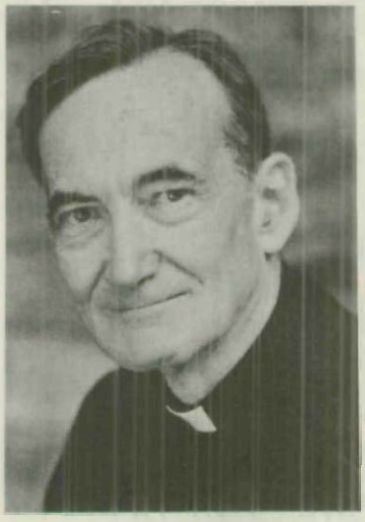

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Let me play devil's advocate for a minute: Pornography degrades women, so it should be banned.

See, I do not follow that argument at *all*. That is the Judeo-Christian misinterpretation of pagan images, that is what I argue in my work. That is a Judeo-Christian position about an image that just does not *say* that. The image is *not* degrading woman. And there are a number of proofs for that. Look at gay male pornography. It is an enormous industry, a worldwide industry. And no one says that about the gay boys in those magazines. In other words, you have gay boys doing exactly the same things that the women are doing. No one ever, for one moment, says that this degrades him. The guys that pose for it, the guys that consume it, everyone knows that, in the Hellenic style, exposure of genitals, exposure of the body is a celebration of the body—not a degradation. Look at Hinduism. There are Hindu temples where you have nothing but huge facades with intertwined couples. And threesomes! And foursomes! And that's considered sacred—in tantric yoga. Copulating bodies, exposure of genitals, that is a form of ritual exhibitionism that is considered an honoring of the fertility principle.

For me, I don't believe in God, yet I believe in all gods. I believe that the great religions of the world are repositories of spiritual experience.

My interpretation of pornography is that it shows *reality*—the animal reality—of sexuality. And people who are disturbed by it are coming from the Judeo-Christian tradition that says that we must rise *above* our animal side. I also argue that heterosexual pornography is about the power of woman and domination by woman. If you look at a lot of pornography (and I certainly do) you see that there are more motifs of female domination of men. Even if you were to find women in subordinate postures, for me it has to do with men's feeling that they are dominated by women.

That's the big reversal I have made on feminist theory. I have said that history is not male oppression and women being victimized; it is women's domination of the universe and men fleeing from the power of women. Most heterosexuals—even the most macho man—would admit that if you talk to them for more than two minutes.

You've also written about the link between pornography and Catholicism . . . .

Well, what I'm saying is that Mediterranean Catholicism has elements, these pagan elements in it, that *we* define as pornographic. In a lot of the imagery of martyrdom, including the martyrdom of Jesus, there is a lot of sado-masochistic sensuality in Mediterranean Catholicism, which later was exported to Mexico and South America.

I still feel that Mediterranean Catholicism is true about the body, true about the realities of life, the barbarities. To use the Hindu phrase—the cycle of birth and death.

In our culture, under the influence of Protestantism, there has been this homogenization, this constant bleaching out of everything ethnic in America. As that happens we get more and more removed from the life of the body. Even though the body is tortured in Catholic iconography, it's still *there*, it's present. But in Protestantism, in Presbyterian, Episcopalian styles, which is very chi-chi (where I grew up the businessmen were always Presbyterian), it's a very bland, country-club style.

That's what I see as the number one problem in America. It absorbs *everything*. The minute you get any ethnic group into the middle class they begin to lose any ethnicity. You have this *incredible* domination by the WASP style. It completely cuts you off at the neck. It makes you very bland, very soft-spoken. All the bloody, barbaric reality of life in the body is *gone*.

So I blame American Catholicism for its evolution, for allowing itself to be subsumed within the style of Protestantism.

And homogenized?

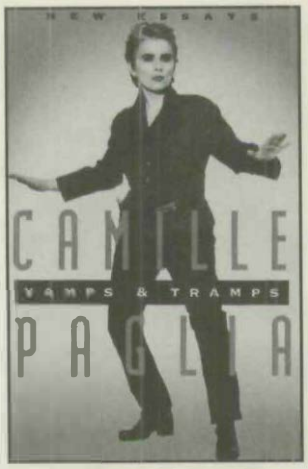
It's been homogenized and turned into "The Donna Reed Show"! I *hate* that! If you go into any suburban Catholic church, it's just *horrendous*. The priest acts towards the parishioners as though we're all friends. And the priests have become increasingly less interested in theology and history. They're there as *therapists*! They hold hands. They're there to be counselors. It's part of the therapeutic culture of America, which again, has turned away from Freud. I love Freud—he's very honest about aggression and the luridness of the sexual consciousness and imagination. But the kind of debased therapy that goes on today is just making you *feel* better about yourself. "I'm O.K., You're O.K."

Whereas the whole *Sturm und Drang* of Catholicism that I remember was really impressive. In fact in my chapter on Swinburne in *Sexual Personae* I mention that in the old days, to say the Litany of the Blessed Virgin at night, in the ethnic era of American Catholicism, was incredibly

impressive. You know, you'd go there and the priest would use these wonderful epithets for Mary. And the crowd would go back and forth, this incredible trance-like thing. These wonderful epithets of Mary. "Mary . . ."

Tower of Ivory.

Yes, Tower of Ivory! These *incredible* pieces of poetry from the priest and then the rumble from the crowd, "Pray for us." It was incredible. And to me it's the Eleusinian mysteries—the night cult—that have survived of Demeter and her daughter, the torch-lit rituals. And it's all gone, it's completely gone! There's *nothing* gloomy, nothing majestic, nothing awesome.



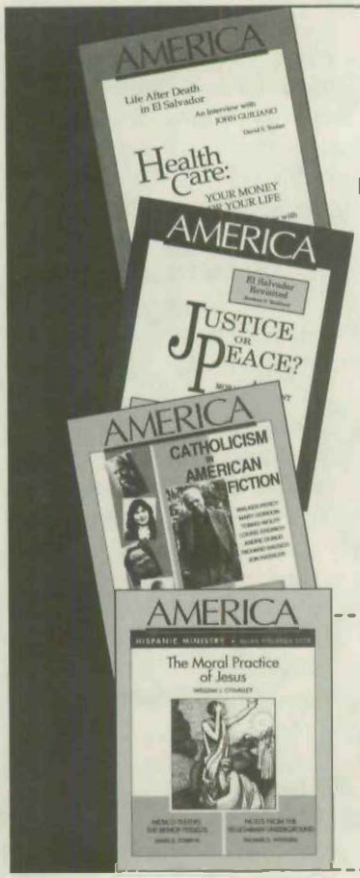
Even the confessional: You'd go into the confessional and it would be so frightening in the dark. And even the *candles* are gone! The elemental flame when you would light the candle. Now, if there are candles at all, they're electric lights! The whole smell of the church is completely different. It all smells like *baby powder* now. It turns my stomach. I mean, I don't identify with anything.

But for young families, the Catholic Church is very powerful and justifiably so. Because it gives a structure to family life. I see that—I live in the suburbs of Philadelphia. I go to church on holidays with my mother. Of course, I cannot *bear* what I see as the banality of the surroundings. And the new thing with the kiss of peace. The shaking hands. I *hate* that shaking hands!

Why do you hate that?

I *loathe* it! It is so 50's America! It's so glad-handing Chamber of Commerce. I hate that. You have to "be nice" to people around you. My mother loves that. *Loves* that. It's her favorite part.

Anyway, I look around me and see clearly that the Catholic Church is thriving. And the church is a powerful influence on young lives and properly so, and it's not to be lamented. We just have to keep that principle of separation of church and state where ultimately policy cannot be dictated by any one religion, but that all religions should be equal in the eyes of the government and that all religious people have a right to lobby and to try to effect policy changes if they can, if they believe the policies are immoral.



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So I have argued in my new book that, even though I am *strongly* for abortion rights, I feel that the feminists have been *outrageously* unjust to the pro-life position. Outrageous and *obscenely* reductive. In point of fact, the ethical argument is stronger on the pro-life side. Career women are arguing from expedience—that it is inconvenient or onerous to bear an unwanted child. The pro-life position is arguing from *ethics* and saying that it is society's obligation to protect the weak and defenseless and also, if you're religious, that you believe every life is intended in God's plan. We have to respect that, for heaven's sake!

I was *very* repelled for years by this. I do support abortion organizations, I belong to them, I send them money. However, I want to throw up when I get their stupid literature. It's really alienated me from the feminist establishment. For 15 years, I've gotten these letters from NOW: "These far-right anti-woman fanatics!" They interpret all opposition to abortion as anti-woman! When in point of fact, I think the Catholic attitude, the Pope's attitude, the pro-life position is *far* more pro-woman than the pro-abortion position!

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I think all this has led to real hysteria in this country: the lack of respect for ethical reasoning, the smugness and complacency of the Democrat position. I mean *I* hate that and I'm a Clinton Democrat! As though we have the truth and anyone that's against us is benighted and ignorant. I hate that! They have no ability to see ethical arguments on the other side. That's the problem here. That's the problem even with the gay argument. I've taken this position all along—that the Bible condemns homosexuality. It does, O.K.? I just hate this going back to history and saying, "Well, it makes us feel bad *now* that people thought that then," and trying to re-write it by claiming, "Oh no, the story of Sodom is not about homosexuality, it was really about hospitality." I hate these sentimental *fantasies*.

And I *hate*, by the way, all these new translations of the Bible that try to obscure where it says "Father" or anything male.

You mean inclusive language?

I hate that! I believe that that is Orwellian! *Orwellian*. Great texts like the Bible must be accurately translated. As a scholar, I think it is absolutely *outrageous* to do any tampering with historical texts merely because it makes people feel better *now*. And, for me, the Bible is one of the greatest books ever written. It's a collection of poetry.

And so, my prescriptions for multi-culturalism: I despise the scenario that history is nothing but white, heterosexist oppressors and the victims are women and people of color. That is not accurate about history. History is a series of atrocities that have been committed by peoples of *all* races. For me, history is about civilization versus barbarism. It's not about white racists suppressing non-whites.

So what I'm calling for—my multi-culturalism—is for all peoples of the world to have a core curriculum based on the great world religions. That seems to me the *only* way out of our current, sterile polarity of liberal versus conservative and the spiritual crisis of the world. I'm coming at this as an atheist—I believe that every single religion is saying something truthful about the universe. And one of my favorite lines from my new book is that "I do not believe in God but I believe that God is man's greatest idea." Therefore, no one can claim to be an educator who cannot deal with ideas about God. And no one should have any influence in education who does not have respect for religion. And that's why I feel that gay activists must be totally outlawed from the area of education, because none of them have shown any ability to deal with these very charged questions.

And we've got to do something to help the young—the young have nothing. They are going to elite schools and being forced to read Lacan, Derrida and Foucault. In other words, greatness has been smashed for them. They're not allowed to believe that any author was ever great—it's just a bunch of small power mongers, right? And it's unfashionable to believe in religion. And so they have *nothing*.

I *despise* the form of education that demolishes the belief systems of students without giving them alternatives. And I think the advantage of my system is that we're not preaching religion. We're not saying this religion is true. We're saying "Look, here are all these spiritual systems. Take from them what you want or reject them or whatever."

Do you favor women's ordination?

This is a very vexed question. I have a cousin who's a nun, and she was always mild-mannered her whole life. She is militant about this issue. She was very aggravated, indignant, because she was working in Canada, where there is a paucity of priests and the nuns are doing everything *but* saying Mass. Now, I shouldn't have an opinion